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Thematic issues: gender and all forms of discrimination, in particular, racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance

Statement submitted by the World Veterans Federation, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 26 July 1996.

* E/CN.6/2001/1.

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The World Veterans Federation (WVF) is pleased to bring to the attention of the Commission on the Status of Women the substance of several resolutions passed at its twenty-third General Assembly (3-10 December 2000) at UNESCO headquarters in Paris, France. This Assembly celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Federation, which also took place at UNESCO in Paris in 1950.

The World Veterans Federation (WVF) is an international non-governmental organization which brings together associations of those who have experienced the sufferings of war, fighting side by side or facing each other in combat, and who want to contribute to the establishment of a more peaceful, just and free world, based on the principles of the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. WVF has 166 member associations in 84 countries.

Recognizing that war and armed conflicts can affect men and women differently, in 1984 WVF created a Standing Committee on Women to focus on the situation of women in armed conflict. It provided considerable input to the drafting of the Beijing Platform for Action on relevant critical areas of concern and continues to be actively involved in the deliberations of United Nations bodies engaged in those areas.

WVF applauds the Commission on the Status of Women for focusing during its forty-fifth session on "Gender and all forms of discrimination, in particular racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance". Such focus is appropriate in view of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, to be held later this year in South Africa. At its twenty-third General Assembly, WVF offered full support for the forthcoming World Conference on Racism and recommended to all its member associations:

(a) To work together with other non-governmental organizations to sensitize public opinion to the urgent need to focus on practical measures to eradicate the scourges exposed in the theme of the conference;

(b) To urge their Governments to adopt attitudes propitious to the achievement of the main objectives of the Conference.

WVF fully supports the recommendation made by the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination at its fifty-sixth session acknowledging that racial discrimination often does not affect women and men equally or in the same way and that there are circumstances in which racial discrimination only or primarily affects women. Therefore, when eradicating gender discrimination is being sought, it is crucial to pay attention to the racial factors that often penalize women as well.

Further, WVF supports the recommendation of the aide memoire for the Commission on the Status of Women expert group meeting on gender and racial discrimination (Zagreb, Croatia, November 2000), which urged that a gender perspective be integrated into the work and decisions of the World Conference on Racism. Women all over the world, including women in armed conflict, have a vital interest in the deliberations of the Conference.

Another area which needs a strong gender perspective is the administration of justice, both on a national level and internationally. WVF has for many years been an advocate for a permanent international criminal court, to provide justice for victims and to deny impunity to those who commit genocide, war crimes and crimes

against humanity. When the Rome Treaty was drawn up in 1998, creating such a Court, WVF urged its members to support it. At its recent General Assembly, WVF once again went on record supporting the Treaty and urging its ratification by States. WVF also called attention to the gender issues that are intrinsic to the Court's being an effective remedy for women. Below is the second part of the WVF resolution that addresses this issue.

International Criminal Court

... Observing that during multiple internal and international conflicts an ever increasing number of grave offences against international humanitarian law are perpetrated throughout the world, in total violation of the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 to which certain States responsible for these crimes are parties and therefore it is urgent that the International Criminal Court put an end to the impunity of those responsible for the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and the crime of aggression;

Urges the member associations to be strong advocates for gender justice so that gender-based crimes against women will be prosecuted with the same dedication as other crimes, and no exemptions would be allowed for religious or cultural reasons;

Urges member associations to appeal to their Governments to sign and ratify the Rome Statute as soon as possible, and without any reservation;

Further urges member associations to use their influence to dissuade their Governments from writing in any new provisions that would dilute the authority and jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, for gender-based crimes and for any other crimes perpetrated by military, political, or peacekeeping personnel.

One of the resolutions passed at the same WVF General Assembly addressed the situation of women in armed conflict.

Women in armed conflict

... 3. Observes that the Beijing + Five Conference meeting held in 2000 gave special emphasis to the issues surrounding women and armed conflict, especially calling attention to the steps taken by the United Nations to end impunity for the criminals who commit crimes against women during armed conflicts such as creation of the International Tribunals for Rwanda and Yugoslavia and the adoption of the Rome Statute for a permanent International Criminal Court;

4. Welcomes the Beijing + Five outcome document's reaffirmation of the need for a partnership between men and women to reach a common goal of gender equality;

5. Expresses satisfaction that the United Nations continues to give strong emphasis to the situation of women caught in armed conflicts, and urges it to continue to do so;

6. Calls upon member associations to press their respective Governments to sign and ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women;

7. Urges member associations to support and work with the Standing Committee on Women in its research and advocacy to call attention to and improve the status and well-being of women and children in armed conflicts.

WVF was one of the first international organizations to support the cause of the "comfort women", mostly Asian women who had been taken from their homes during World War II by the Japanese Army for sexual slavery purposes and whose lives were ruined by those experiences. With several court cases pending in Japan, WVF appealed again "to member associations to strongly urge their Governments to support the United Nations agencies' demands that the comfort women be compensated and be given an official apology for what happened during World War II ..."

Another resolution passed at the twenty-third General Assembly made a strong plea for women suffering the consequences of war.

Assistance to victims of violence

... 1. Noting that victims of violence, especially women, suffer from its consequences to a large extent and from discrimination also after the conflicts have ended in the individual States;

2. Recalling that public opinion does not pay the necessary attention to the needs of these women for appropriate assistance;

3. Considers it important that further assistance should be provided and offered to the groups of persons, including material and psycho-social help and comprehensive health care.

Other resolutions addressed the needs of women who are most of the civilian victims of war. One resolution argues for more assistance for returning refugees.

Assistance for returning refugees

... 1. Noting that many States have accepted refugees from States in conflict who now want to return into their native countries;

2. Recalling that the necessary protection and security must absolutely be re-established, i.e., by mine clearance;

3. Considers it important that the returning refugees receive the necessary protection as well as the help they need in order to be able to build up their lives in the destroyed areas;

4. Requests that the donor States coordinate their assistance in such a way that people with disabilities be given special attention and access to the services they require upon their repatriation.

Concern for the post-war status of women civilians who are victims of war was expressed in yet another resolution which urged that sufficient pensions for widows and dependants of war veterans and war disabled be provided, "considering that

pensions and allowances granted to widows and dependants of war veterans and war disabled are insufficient and do not enable them to meet their needs ...". The resolution further urges those Governments concerned to introduce legislative measures that would guarantee pensions and allowances and harmonize legal provisions in order to avoid inequalities.

Another subject on WVF's agenda is education for peace. This has been of special concern over the years to the WVF Standing Committee on Women. WVF paid tribute to this important UNESCO initiative in the following resolution quoted below.

Education for peace

... 1. Noting that UNESCO for several years has been steadfastly supporting a culture of peace initiative as an alternative to the culture of war that has dominated human history since it began, congratulates UNESCO and the United Nations for acknowledging the importance of this endeavour by designating the year 2000 as the "Year of the culture of peace";

2. Bearing in mind the commitment of associations of war veterans and victims of war in the fields of education for peace and in the initiation to a democratic and social way of life;

3. Considering that too many conflicts, internal tensions and national problems persisting in the world at the end of the twentieth century find as a pretext exacerbated nationalism, racism, ethnic or religious exclusions, makes its own UNESCO's concept that "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed";

4. Invites member associations to inform and involve young people in one or more initiatives of UNESCO's Culture of Peace, to understand better the values of peace defended by the World War II generation with great sacrifices, and to motivate them to reject all racial, ethnic, religious and cultural hatreds, and inspire them to express solidarity with all oppressed peoples.

WVF policy positions are taken in the spirit of the WVF credo first articulated by Ralph Bunche: "None can speak more eloquently for peace than those who have fought in war."